

THEODOR HERZL: OUTSIDER AS NATIONAL LEADER

Is the Price Cultural Assimilation?

LESTER SELIGMAN

THE political leadership of underprivileged groups — working-class parties, oppressed national groups, Jews and Negroes in the United States—has often, it has been observed, been drawn from “outsiders.” Herzl was such an outsider—an assimilated Western intellectual who returned, following the classic example of that outsider who became a leader—Moses.

Somewhat paradoxically in such cases—certainly it was so with both Moses and Herzl—the fact that the leader is a stranger helps to win him acceptance. As Shmarya Levin said, had Moses risen from the ranks of the enslaved Jews to urge them to free themselves he would have been rejected. Just because the people saw that the ideas of such a leader could not have arisen from their tradition, they could all the more easily accept him as inspired.

But often the isolation of the leader from the life of the people has another consequence; it contributes a certain un-folkish character to the movement he leads. More than one observer has noted how “un-Jewish” was Herzl’s Zionism. Indeed, and especially

of late, the view has been expressed that Herzlianism was more than the movement of escape from Europe and Western civilization which it is commonly regarded as: was it perhaps, we hear it asked by Hannah Arendt and others, a movement with assimilationist tendencies?

Obviously, a great deal that Herzl never dreamed of has happened to political Zionism since he founded it, and it would be naive to think we could find out what it “really is” by studying Herzl’s ideas. Zionism did not long remain the movement Herzl originally envisaged. Even before his early death, it had become very different from the conception that had evolved in his mind and found expression in his writings before he had had much contact with “real” Jews. Nevertheless, an examination of Herzl’s early ideas is revealing. It not only shows us what political Zionism was originally intended to be, but even now helps us to understand many things about the movement and state that have come so far from the original ideas of their founder.

POLITICAL Zionism is the peculiar movement of a peculiar people. And Theodor Herzl, dramatist and theater critic, was its appropriately peculiar founder and first great leader. Here LESTER A. SELIGMAN, assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago, analyzes the social background and personal motivations that resulted in Herzl’s program; and considers the long-range meaning of this program, stemming from the special position of an assimilated cosmopolitan intellectual of the *fin de siècle*, for contemporary Israel. Mr. Seligman was formerly president of the Midwest Region and member of the National Executive Committee of Avukah, the National Student Zionist Federation. He was born in Chicago in 1918, and attended the University of Chicago. He is now at work on a book-length study of political leadership.

BORN in Budapest, Herzl was the only offspring of middle-class Jewish parents. While he was yet a young child the Jews of Austria-Hungary received their formal civil emancipation. The atmosphere of his home was that of most liberal Austrian Jews: only a perfunctory identification with Judaism remained, and German culture, not Jewish, was the vital educative element. In this middle-class home, typical of the culture that gave birth to the Schnitzlers, the Zweigs, the Vámbérys, and the Nordaus, achievement and success, with all that these meant in the way of social acceptance, were the major goals. A variety of Victorian optimism obtained among Jews according to which one had but to “make it” in order to over-

come all social restrictions. This was the specifically Jewish form of the general credo that man's progress to full freedom was inevitable. Herzl never quite abandoned it, even after his conversion to Zionism: he merely shifted the time of its fulfillment. Thus, he wrote in the *Judenstaat*: "I believe in the ascent of man to higher and yet higher grades of civilization; but I consider this ascent to be desperately slow."

In the absence of this final fulfillment, personal achievement could serve to free the individual Jew, as it served to raise great men generally above the limitations of birth and position. Herzl's generation revered and worshiped heroic personalities and consciously strove to identify itself with the great; his own heroes were Goethe and Napoleon in the past, and Bismarck in the present. The conventional ladders of social ascent for people in Herzl's milieu were not, however, warfare and politics, but journalism and the theater, where Jewish or any other "national" identification played little role. The heroes of these relatively new fields of endeavor were able to cross all boundaries and they developed a cosmopolitan outlook, owing allegiance to no particular country—they were "Europeans."

Herzl did "make it." After an early career in law, he shifted to journalism and the theater, rising to become the *feuilleton* editor (or leader-writer) of the Vienna *Neue Freie Presse*, the outstanding newspaper of Central Europe. He became unusually adept at this form and turned out clever essays, light, deft, and without profundity. One of Herzl's colleagues characterized his person and his theatrical writings as follows: "None was better able to give unconsciously what the Viennese wanted. When, in collaboration with a colleague, he wrote a graceful comedy for the Burg Theater, it was just what everyone wanted, a dainty morsel made of the finest ingredients and artistically served. Moreover, the man was strikingly handsome—courteous, obliging, entertaining; indeed none was more beloved, better known . . . than he among the entire bourgeoisie and aristocracy of old Austria."

THE earlier biographers of Herzl, such as Reuben Brainin, De Haas, and Friedman, were sure that the Jewish question did not trouble him during his Vienna days. More recent research by Bein and others indicates that Herzl, while he evinced no strong conscious identification with Jews, did not entirely escape the Jewish problem. He experienced several anti-Semitic incidents, and his response to them varied from annoyance to indignation, but was never strong enough to cross the threshold of his defenses and upset his adjustment. The question of how many anti-Semitic incidents he experienced, or of how many times he commented on the Jewish problem before his Zionist conversion, is answered differently by each of his biographers. This disagreement does not, however, alter the fundamental fact of Herzl's essential divorce from Jewish life. Herzl himself made the remark that until he read Dühring's anti-Semitic diatribes he did not know he was a Jew.

In 1891 Herzl was sent to Paris by his newspaper. There he read Drumont's anti-Semitic book *La France Juive*, which was then enjoying a sensational popularity. Although the question of anti-Semitism was now coming increasingly to the foreground of his attention, Herzl was still able to suggest to a representative of the Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus (Association for Defense against Anti-Semitism) that dueling was an effective method in combating the external symptoms of anti-Semitism and that its more fundamental causes would be eliminated by the disappearance of Jews as a separate people through baptism and intermarriage. He wrote: "The idea of general baptism is half facetious and half serious. I am permitted to say it, I who would not be baptized. But what about my son Hans? When I think of his future I am ready to admit that the pressure of his Jewishness will teach him much concerning humanity. But I ask myself whether I have the right to make life as superfluously difficult for him as it has become for me and will become in increasing measure. When he grows up I hope he will be too proud to renounce his

faith, even though he have as little of it as I." But note his conclusion: "That is why we must baptize Jewish children while they are still incapable of giving themselves an accounting and while they can still feel nothing either for it or against it. We must submerge ourselves in the people."

At the beginning of his diary—in Paris, in 1895—he recalls a practical effort to solve the Jewish problem by conversion: "About two years ago I wanted to solve the Jewish question, at least in Austria, with the help of the Catholic Church. I wanted to get an *entrée* to the Pope, not without having assured myself in advance of the assistance of the Austrian upper clergy, and to say to him: 'Help us against anti-Semitism, and I shall lead a great movement for the free and decent conversion of the Jews to Christianity.'

"Free and decent because the leaders of this movement—and I above all—would remain Jews and would propagate the idea as Jews. The conversion was to take place in broad daylight, at twelve o'clock on Sunday, in the San Stefan Cathedral of Vienna, in festive procession and to the sound of bells. Not in shame, as single individuals have done hitherto, but with proud gestures. . . ."

Herzl's characteristic reaction to anti-Semitic charges against Jews was to accept them as, in most cases, valid and to explain them by the fact that Jews were not yet fully acclimated to emancipation. His apology could be paraphrased as, "Give us time and we shall shed these undesirable traits." Zionism he could not countenance. After witnessing a performance of the Dumas play *Claude's Wife*, in which a Jewish character, Daniel, expresses a desire to return to the ancient Jewish homeland in Palestine, Herzl wrote: "The good Jew Daniel wants to rediscover the homeland of his race and gather his scattered brothers in it. But a man like Daniel would surely know that the historic homeland of the Jews no longer has any value for them. It is childish to go in search of the geographical location of this homeland. And if the Jews really 'returned home' one day, they would discover on the

next that they did not belong together. For centuries they have been rooted in diverse nationalisms . . . the only thing they have in common is the pressure which holds them together. All humiliated people have Jewish characteristics, and as soon as the pressure is removed they react like liberated men."

HERZL began to be more concerned with the Jewish question in the period just before the Dreyfus Affair. His concern found expression in *Das Neue Ghetto*, a play whose climax finds a Jewish character responding to insult by retaliation rather than by submission. But it was the Dreyfus Affair that finally heightened his anxiety into personal crisis, just as it did for Nordau, Bernard Lazare, and others. At first Herzl, as did almost everyone else, regarded Dreyfus as guilty. As he saw it, it was not that an innocent man was being falsely accused, but that a guilty man was being cruelly humiliated. It was only after Dreyfus's public sentencing that Herzl saw that this was no ordinary trial for treason. The behavior of the mob, the irrationality of its clamor for the punishment of the convicted man, its sadistic joy in his humiliation, its cry of "*à mort les Juifs*"—all this jarred Herzl's poise.

However, it was not simply the irrationality of the mob that aroused Herzl; he also saw in it a threat to his own world. Captain Dreyfus came from an Alsatian Jewish family that had moved to Paris following the Franco-Prussian war. This family's ardent desire for social acceptance was not unlike that of Herzl's own family: and a military career promised acceptance. Herzl could not fail to discern in the parvenu Dreyfus the very image of himself and his own milieu. And the fact that this act of calculated political anti-Semitism could occur in France, the cradle of liberalism and Jewish emancipation and the chief home of pan-intellectualism, was a shattering blow. Furthermore, the way in which the clergy and aristocracy of France exploited the affair to promote their anti-republican policies showed that the roots of anti-Semitism were deeply imbedded in the social structure.

The shock of the Dreyfus case deepened Herzl's awareness of the immensity of the tragedy of self-rejection and group rejection. He had already raised—and he thought, solved—this problem in *Das Neue Ghetto*. Now the Dreyfus episode threw him back to the agitated search for a more adequate orientation. Typically, Herzl now turned to Baron Hirsch, the man who had been spending vast sums to encourage Jewish migration to “normalcy” in Argentina, to press upon him the as yet uncrystallized ideas stirring in his mind. Herzl stressed the importance of “elevating” the Jew, of improving his character. Two courses to this end were open, he suggested, the long-run method of ultimate assimilation and the short-run method of migration. Both methods served the same end; that is, the Jew would receive from the world a universally recognized status that insured him dignity and recognition.

Hirsch, however, was not sympathetic to a program of elevating the Jews, or rather his conception of elevation was quite different from Herzl's. The baron, who had “arrived,” wanted Jews to discard their urban character and middle-class values and become farmers. Herzl, the rejected one, thought rather of achieving acceptance in terms of urban bourgeois values. Hirsch, in the best “*shtadlanut*” tradition, favored the quiet, respectable methods of philanthropy. Herzl, with an intuitive sense of the “political,” wanted mass mobilization, propaganda, and power politics. Herzl grew impatient. There was no bridge between these conceptions; discussion with Baron Hirsch was fruitless.

The encounter with Baron Hirsch only plunged Herzl into a deeper anxiety. His whole set of aspirations had been shattered; his carefully created image of himself had been ground under foot. “I wrote walking, standing, lying down, on the street, at table, by night when I was driven forth from my sleep,” he recorded in his diary. The security of status he had so ardently pursued could now be attained only by the establishment of a state, with himself as its leader. His ideas poured forth under intense agitation. The *Staats-idee*—the “state-idea”—became an

obsession. “I refer everything to it, as a lover refers everything to his beloved.”

Throughout this crisis the twin feelings of aggressiveness and guilt are apparent. The desire for positive action is accompanied by the question, “Why didn't I discover this sooner?”—a question that seems to be the inevitable component of any conversion. Must not the new discovery be regarded as having always been the good? Moreover, one's sense of guilt must be acute when two hardly reconcilable positions are to be reconciled—being a Jew, and gaining social acceptance by hostile non-Jewish society.

THE significant fact about Herzl is that he was a solitary or isolated convert. Religious conversion at evangelistic meetings is made easier by the immediate presence around one of a cohesive group ready to welcome the new convert. The critical transition from the old to the new is cushioned by one's easy acceptance into the new group. By accepting the new values one does not isolate oneself, one rather enters a group with a more intense feeling of “belonging.” Herzl's conversion, however, was effected without a major effort to seek contact with Jews as a group. He did not try to acquaint himself with the Jewish past, to knit about himself the strands of his people's history. The sense of community was something he had never experienced, nor was he now impelled to seek it. The *Judenstaat*, the plan for a Jewish state, was fashioned entirely out of himself. The result was that his cataclysmic conversion was only partial. It involved necessarily an assertion of identification with the Jews, but did not involve any assertion of identification with Jewish culture and Jewish values.

Herzl's *Judenstaat* has been treated as an expression of systematic political thinking—as a diagnosis of anti-Semitism and a program for its rational solution. However, Herzl's ideology was more significant as something psychologically indispensable to himself. The *Judenstaat*, Herzl's promised land, was a paradise that promised the final acceptance of Jews by a Gentile world whose values, as

a Westernized middle-class intellectual, Herzl had never rejected. This isolated convert, who, because isolated, was only partially converted, gives birth to a territorialist solution (the *Judenstaat* does not mention Palestine with all its rich associations in Jewish history, religion, and culture: his pro-Palestine came later and was always suspect in the eyes of the Eastern European intelligentsia) that will resolve his personal dilemma. The Jewish state will fuse the values of the world that is his, but rejects him, with the values of a group for whose conduct he apologizes and from which he has been dissociated. The Jewish state will be the tangent to both circles—and at that point Herzl will be a Jew.

That his image of the Jewish state incorporates his own urban bourgeois values, the following items from his diaries make clear: "I went to see *Tannhäuser* in the evening. We, too, shall have the same splendid public edifices, the gentlemen in frock coats, the ladies as luxurious as can be. Yes, I shall make use of Jewish luxuriousness, as of everything else." "All officials must be uniformed, handsomely, neatly, but not absurdly. . . ." "Circenses as soon as possible: German theater, international theater, opera, operetta, café concert, café Champs Elysées." "On the ship [referring to the final journey to the Jewish state] we shall wear full dress to dinner, and over there we shall have some degree of elegance as soon as possible. The idea: the Jews must not get the impression that they are going into the wilderness. No! This migration takes place in the midst of culture. We remain in the midst of culture even while we migrate. We don't want a peasant state, but a Venice." "I need the duel in order to have proper officers, and in order to refine the tone of good society on the French model."

The theme of these remarks, and Herzl's later insistence upon a dignified Zionist movement, constitute the essence of the Herzlian conception—that Zionism and the Jewish state are to be a means to acceptance and recognition by the non-Jewish world. As Herzl stated: "The Jews will leave as

honored friends and if some of them return, they will receive the same favorable welcome and treatment at the hands of civilized nations as is accorded to all foreign visitors."

HERZL now moves into the imagined Jewish state he has just constructed, and becomes its first inhabitant and its chief of state. "I shall be the Parnell of the Jews," he writes. Magnanimously, he says ". . . I do not want to repulse poor Hirsch. I shall make him vice-president."

It is not he who has journeyed back to the Jewish people. He has constructed a bridge to them, and it is he, the convert, who asks them to cross the bridge to him. His Zionism is not so much a return as a counter-thrust for the sake of winning non-Jewish acceptance.

Thus, from the beginning Herzl's ideology is not a program against assimilation but rather a program for those who would assimilate but are not permitted to. "The Society of Jews," he writes, "has as its task the obtaining, under legal sanction, of a territory for those Jews who cannot assimilate." His diagnosis of the Jewish problem appears to be dialectically compounded of the following elements:

1. Jewish nationhood and cohesiveness are the products of anti-Semitism.
2. Anti-Semitism is inevitable in the present stage of historical progress and, hence, attempts to assimilate are Sisyphus-like and doomed to failure.
3. Large-scale migration is urgent and practical.
4. All quarters seem favorably disposed toward the realization of a Jewish state; thus, anti-Semitism creates Jewish solidarity and provides the motive-power for migration; migration should please the Jew who desires to assimilate because it eliminates the ambiguity of his status; it should also please the anti-Semite because he desires to be rid of the Jew. "The countries they abandon will revive to a new period of prosperity."
5. The departure of the Jews and the establishment of the state will put an end to anti-Semitism.

This diagnosis shows two significant aspects. First, the Jews are conceived of as constituting a community only because of external pressure. This is the typical "post-assimilation" approach, which states, on the negative side, that the Jews lack internal elements of cohesion and can create a community only through emigration and the establishment of nationhood. Against this, there is an exaggerated optimism that sees all factors as favorable to a territorialist solution. In Herzl's diagnosis everything was converging dialectically toward this solution—history was propelling it; it accorded with the interests of anti-Semites; it was, of course, essential to all Jews; and it was helpful to those who wished to assimilate. The Jewish intelligentsia, the Jewish masses, and the rabbinate, we are told, all recognize the wisdom of the solution.

Herzl did not in fact ascertain whether the situation was as he described it: whether or not the anti-Semites, for example, would really support him. The convert has the emotional need to construe everything in the situation as guaranteeing success. ("What are ten billion *marks* for the Jews?" he wrote to Hirsch at the beginning. "They are richer than the French were before 1870. . . . As a matter of fact, under pressure of necessity we could start off with one billion. . . .") Herzl's over-optimism, growing out of the need to create a milieu in which he could live in psychological peace, determined his every political step. His entire career, once he became a politician, is marked by an inability to see overwhelming political and practical difficulties and an unwillingness to accept any unfavorable turn of events, or rather to accept any such turn as decisive—every defeat is seen as at least a partial victory. The resolute outlook had to be sustained at all costs, since defeat spelled a return to his impossible psychological position.

How then explain the enthusiastic adherence of Jews to this alien figure? My major intention has been to show that Herzl's political motivations derive from his

position as a convert in isolation, but no study of leadership can omit its most significant aspect—representativeness.

Representativeness, it would seem, arises out of the similarity in the way in which both leader and led visualize the situation. And there were a number of respects in which Herzl's diagnosis and program echoed the conceptions of East European Jewry. First, unlike the early Hovevei Zion and the followers of Ahad Ha'am, he had sensed the immense and tragic need of the masses of East European Jews for escape through migration. *Their* need for migration—as opposed to his own—grew out of their objective, material circumstances, which Ahad Ha'am and other East European thinkers had failed to see as a mass Jewish problem demanding an immediate program.

Second, the vision Herzl proclaimed was on a large scale and promised dignity for Jews—to be achieved not only in the *Judenstaat* itself, but also in the struggle, as he conceived it, for its attainment. East European Jews hungered for status; by daring to place the struggling enterprise of a small people on a level with other national movements he could not help but fire the imagination of Jews. His successes in the world at large—he was a Jew who had been received by kings and sultans—offered a glowing image of power to the powerless and the fearful. Perhaps Hasidism, with the conditioning it gave Jews in accepting charismatic leaders, played a part. But for that matter, it should be remembered the entire social structure of East European Jewry was by no means democratic, but was based rather upon inarticulate mass obedience to either rabbinical or plutocratic leadership.

But perhaps most important in accounting for the adherence he won from the Jewish masses was Herzl's expression of urgency and great expectations. Urgency marked the tempo of his Zionism from the very first. It was to be done *now*, and he expected it to be fulfilled *now*. This sense of great expectations and urgency never abandoned him. The skepticism of some of his adherents only reinforced it. It was, as we have

suggested, urgently necessary to his psychological security that the Jewish state be realized quickly. But this sense of immediacy was also politically necessary, since victories of some sort in the here and now were needed to retain the support of those who feared Herzl might be another Sabbatai Zevi.

In any case, Herzl became a saintlike hero to European Jews in London and in Vilna. It is reported by Dr. Adolf Friedman that in a long and protracted debate at a Zionist Actions Committee meeting, Herzl's reply to an attack by a representative of Russian Jewry was, "And with whom will the masses go?" which resolved the argument.

But Herzl's vision failed him elsewhere. Contrary to his expectations, rich Jews did not come to his aid; the Reform rabbinate (who were expected by him to be the shepherds organizing the flock) denounced him; the assimilationists regarded him as an obstructionist. The East European Haskalah intelligentsia, though they worked with him, did so always with feelings of mistrust and suspicion. He was always on probation for them. Also, he optimistically over-rated the efficacy of personal diplomacy. Sober analysis would have shown him that the power politics of the time was not propitious for the use of Jewish opinion and money as a lever to pry concessions from Turkey.

Thus the fact that he was a convert in isolation was both an advantage and a disadvantage to him. Because of his isolation he could break the bonds of tradition and revivify national tendencies weighed down by pedestrian outlooks and parochial methods. Because of his ignorance, he could function despite his and his people's limitations and despite an unfavorable external reality. But out of isolation were born the mistakes in his estimate of the situation, and an ideal image of a Jewish state that was at variance with folk and messianic images. His strength and his shortcomings thus arose from the same condition—his isolation from Judaism and the Jews.

IS IT too early for history to give a verdict on Herzl? Cannot the establishment of

the state be regarded as a testament to the success of his ideology? Cannot it be said that it was Herzl who (with Pinsker) wrenched Zionism from its traditionalistic messianism and secularized its meaning as a program for the present and through political means? And has his wisdom not even confirmed that the ultimate position and security of this state must rest upon a realistic program of men, money, and power? This is the view of the political Zionists who have numbered among their leaders Nordau, Jabotinsky, and many of the alienated Westerners who returned to the fold as converts.

In a position fundamentally antipodal would stand another tradition in Zionism: cultural and labor Zionism, which includes among its authors Ahad Ha'am, A. D. Gordon, Brenner, Berditchevsky, and Buber. These men were primarily concerned with asking the question, "What kind of Jewish community will the autonomous area be?" For them Zionism was essentially a vision of community—a community unified by territory, history, and Jewish ethos, but also a community of social brotherhood, expressing a universal ideal. In their preoccupation with the character of the community, they relegated means to a subsidiary position. The primary test of Zionism for them was the extent to which it was the fulfillment of the self-realized Jewish ethical and cultural community. Many years ago Ahad Ha'am asked this question when he wrote: "What is the good of finding our own land, when we do not have, as it were, any character of our own?"

Today these two positions exist in tension in Israel. The past decade of Israeli existence has willy-nilly exalted the role of the political realism and activity that is part of the Herzlian heritage. The intoxication with political victory has left its traces in the form of a distorted exaggeration of the role of the political. Of course, Israel has most pressing problems, and it may appear irresponsible to speak now of an "exaggeration of the political." Yet in the long run the most important problem is one for which the adequacy of a political outlook may be ques-

tioned. What is this Israel? What is this Jewish nation? What manner of community is this to be? Is it a group united only by territorial existence? Is it simply a plurality of communities with widely varying cultural, social, and religious outlooks? Is it a community to be dominated by those who wish to reject the past completely, like the recently formed sect of "neo-Canaanites"? Is it to be dominated by a religious traditionalism that cannot face the present? Paradoxically, the perplexities over group character that Zionism justly regarded as a Diaspora tragedy arise again precisely when autonomy is fulfilled and the "in-gathering of exiles" is taking place.

THOSE are perhaps the most challenging questions facing Israel today and for the future. Concerning these questions, the answers of Herzlianism must be found wanting. A conception of Jewish community as the product of external oppression affords no

answer to the issue of what type of inner character this community should possess. A vision that made statehood and acceptance in the non-Jewish world the ultimate goal is by definition no longer relevant and without any force. For the opponents of Herzl, however, those concerned with "a character of our own," May 1948 is a mere point on a much longer road to Zionist fulfillment.

The circle is in a sense completed. A Zionism that lived for ages as a messianic vision of community passed through a dynamic period of secularization and political self-awareness. This period was necessary; and Herzl and his program were appropriate for that stage in the struggle. But today, that outlook is spent, and Zionism, it would seem, will have to return to the question of the character of the community once again—not necessarily in the old ways, for the question must be examined afresh. For that answer the alienated Westerner of the Herzlian type has, perhaps, not much to say.

IN A TIME BETWEEN WARS

MILTON KAPLAN

Now in the spring of the year
When the maples ripple green
In wind-swept water images,
I walk a landscape grown
Desolate, and read the trees
Black on the winter pages.

On the baseball field the players dance
A seasonal charade:
From glance to glance to glance
They toss a hand grenade.

The dervish girls on every street
Jump counterpoint to rhyme,
While underneath their shattered feet
The rope keeps ticking time.

The cowboys charge on roller skates,
The lassos whirling high;
The customary victim waits
His daily turn to die,
And over him with birthday gun
Uplifted, stands my son.

MILTON KAPLAN's poems have appeared in previous issues of COMMENTARY; he has also published both poetry and criticism in other magazines, and is the author of *Radio and Poetry* (1949).